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STANLEY ARONOWITZ & KAREN GREGORY

**JOBLESS HIGHER ED: REVISITED**  
**AN INTERVIEW WITH STANLEY ARONOWITZ**

In February 2015 Karen Gregory sat down with Stanley Aronowitz, Distinguished Professor in the PhD program in sociology at the City University of New York (CUNY) Graduate Center and Director of the Center for the Study of Culture, Technology, and Work, to discuss the future of labor in higher education. In 1998, Professor Aronowitz spoke with Andrew Long for an interview titled “Jobless Higher Ed,” which ran in *Workplace: A Journal for Academic Labor*. As editors of this special edition of *Workplace*, we thought we would speak with Professor Aronowitz in order to gain a sense of how the terrain of labor in higher education has (or has not) shifted since the late 1990s.

*Gregory:* In 1998, you suggested that faculty and graduate students often refuse to think of their work within the larger context of economic and social relations. Do you think this has changed over the last few years?

*Aronowitz:* Since 75 percent of courses taught in the post-secondary system (falsely called ‘higher learning’ or ‘higher education’) [are taught by contingent faculty], the question is whether these people, who are part-time temporary adjuncts, have begun to see themselves as workers. The answer is more and more, yes. That accounts for the fact that there's been a growth of unionization among academics, although it's been much slower than one would expect. The reason for their growing recognition is that now we have a phenomenon, which was heatedly denied by sociologists, many of them prominent education people, a permanent phenomenon in the American academic system. They thought things would turn around, that the economic situation would make it possible for funding to be revived, mostly at the state level.

The fact of the matter is that the funding was not revived, and many of them became career adjuncts. However, in many parts of the country, with the decline of the labor movement, especially in the 80s, 90s, and the 2000s, the support for union organizing outside of the major cities in major centers declined precipitously. So they felt, in many cases, that they were in the lurch. They were left in the lurch, and many of them are living on incomes of \$25,000 or less and finding themselves teaching—the old phrase ‘freeway flyer,’ which is a Californian phrase, now applies almost everywhere. I know adjuncts, there's a guy I know, a very good friend of mine actually. He was in comp lit, he had six jobs until he got a job at Kingsborough Community College, a full-time job, where now he only teaches five courses a semester and four courses another semester, and he thinks he's died and gone to heaven because he used to teach six courses and fly around all over the place, private and public universities.

So, the problem is not only union organization, but the problem is a sense that they had—I use the word advisedly—that they are a class, that they are a group that is not consonant with the full-time tenured or tenure-track faculty at the graduate schools, not even consonant with the K-12 teachers. That they are really, in many ways, they have much more in common with fast-food workers or waiters and waitresses. These are people, artists, and writers who are really, in some sense, in a position of contingency. So, in many cases, they don't organize out of fear because a lot of the deals that they get are guaranteed only for one or two semesters and then they can be fired at any time. They won't be renewed, and so they keep their mouths shut, not all of them, but many of them keep their mouths shut, and they continue to soldier on.

*Gregory:* Graduate students have had some success organizing recently. Do you think there is a possibility that those organizing campaigns could actually blossom into a much bigger academic labor movement?

*Aronowitz:* The answer is maybe. It would require, in the first place, a coalition of the unions that are now in the field of organizing adjuncts. One of them is the AFT, the NEA, SEIU, UAW. All of them are out there, and they're all operating as individual entrepreneurial unions. They would have to agree on a coalition. They have to become the sum of academic organizing, which, like the CIO in the 1930s, basically pooled their efforts and did not worry about who the group would be assigned if and when they won a representative election or struck for recognition.

Under present circumstances, it is unlikely. I will use the word 'possible.' It's possible, but it's not probable. There's no labor movement. The unions have become, in some sense, the activist unions have become, in some sense, mirror images of startups. They are being very entrepreneurial, very individual, and very competitive and see no reason, in most cases, to unite with each other to organize. In fact, they compete sometimes during NLRB or state labor board representative elections.

*Gregory:* If organizing is going to end up mired in these entrepreneurial agencies, what other possibilities are there? Do you see any other...?

*Aronowitz:* I have come to the reluctant conclusion, having been an executive council member of the PSC, the Professional Staff Congress, which represents the adjuncts in a manner of speaking, that the adjuncts would be better off forming their own organizations. The best possibility, the best-case possibility, as difficult as it would be, would be for the adjuncts that are organized “as adjuncts” on a national scale... to decide to form themselves into a union. I don't mean just for purposes of collective bargaining. I mean to raise the larger issues of working conditions and their own intellectual development. I can go down the list of what is really necessary because the unions that I say—the SEIU, the teachers, the AFT, and so on—they don't care about any of that. They may say they care. It's in their hype, but it's really hype mostly. They care about wages, working conditions, and representation, and whether the dues are shoveling in, but they don't really represent the fullness of their needs and the demands of part-time labor in academia.

That's the big problem. Now, if COCAL or some other organization started out, not as a union that was attempting to, primarily, collectively bargain (although I would not exclude that), if they really became something of a national force, then they might exert pressure on the existing so-called legitimate unions. But they don't see themselves that way, and they don't function that way. It would require an apparatus. It would require full-time organizers. It would require recruitment. Now, the AAUP, the American Association of University Professors, has two categories of membership. Their largest category is now of collective bargaining. Their smaller one—about a third of their members are in chapters—do not have collective bargaining rights. If the adjuncts organize chapters without necessarily having collective bargaining rights, it begins to agitate for their own needs beyond wages.

*Gregory:* For such things as?

*Aronowitz:* Well, for one thing, the right to have sabbaticals, and secondly, a reduction of workloads, which is terribly important. In many cases, they are working too much, and they can't do their own work. Now, the third thing obviously would be a certain sense, not a personal sense, but an institutionalized sense of security—what we call in the PSC a “Certificate of Continuous Employment,” which means de

facto security as an adjunct and that they can't fire you after one year or six months or whatever it is that they are able to do. Those would be core things. The fourth thing would be for those chapters to run their own educational and training activities for adjuncts. That is to say, have colloquia and to have discussions of teaching and pedagogy.

As you very well know, the problem we have in higher education, in general, and CUNY is really no exception, is that most of the faculty don't know anything about pedagogy. Zip. They stand in front of classes, and they lecture for two hours from old notes or sometimes they do it extemporaneously, but they don't really understand pedagogy, and there's no real discussion in the union or, for that matter, in the faculty senate or any of the other institutions of the university, except occasionally, about these problems. Then, connected to that would be colloquia or educational programs that keep adjuncts abreast of new developments in their own disciplines. One of the things that happens if you're teaching all the time is that you lose track of what's going on. It doesn't mean you have to agree with everything that's going on, but at least you have to know about it.

The other thing that the PSC did, which was quite progressive, it seems to me, is that they began to recruit some of the adjuncts into full-time positions. Not enough, but some of the adjuncts were able to get full-time positions, and that should be continually a fight.

*Gregory:* It's almost like you're imagining a future of the university where adjuncting is the norm but where adjuncts have organized for themselves, in and of themselves, and where they see themselves as a class.

*Aronowitz:* That's right.

*Gregory:* Do you think we'll end up with divided universities, some being full-time teaching universities and where research is done only at a select handful of R1 schools? Or do you imagine that adjuncts would still be able to conduct their own research?

*Aronowitz:* But that's the point. The point would be to reduce adjunct workload and provide sabbaticals or time off at whatever intervals, so that they can actually do their work. Of course, the ideal situation, which I think is the most improbable, is the situation as of 1970 or 1975, even 1980, where the adjunct was essentially an outside professional who taught a course that was not offered from within. For example, lawyers who teach law, sociology of law, for example, or medical people might teach about health, but that's not what's going on. They're teaching ordinary discipline-based courses.

*Gregory:* Is there any hope within the existing governance structures of the university to make the argument for tenured, full-time, secure jobs again? Or is the future the organizing of adjuncts and trying to re-create what labor looks like in the university?

*Aronowitz:* It seems to me that the unions, as well as the faculty senates or faculty councils, as they're called in some places, are really, in many ways, devoted to the full-time faculty. Not only that, but many of the faculty senates are in bed with the administration and are dominated by the administration. So, they are improbable allies, although the fight to get them to change their positions is not a bad fight. But you first have to be organized in order to make the fight. The problem with adjuncts is as long as they think that they don't have a shot at organization short of collective bargaining, then they're not going to organize. They have to be persuaded that it's worthwhile organizing without necessarily having collective bargaining and become a force without a contract necessarily. I argue that in my new book, *The Life and Death of American Labor* (Verso, 2014).

About contracts, I have to say this: In the public sector, including higher education, especially in those states like New York, which prohibits strikes by public employees, unions are more like professional associations with insurance programs and sometimes some kind of marginal pressure on the institution. They are not unions. There is no such thing as a legitimate part, a legitimate labor movement, that doesn't have the right to strike. It doesn't exist. Now, I have good friends, some of whom are very prominent labor sociologists, who say that strikes are now often promoted or forced by the employer. That's all true, but

the right to strike is a First Amendment right, and the courts have denied it. Those laws, which are on the books and prohibit the right to strike by public employees, will not be in any near term abrogated by legislation. It will have to be done by direct action, and unions that are not prepared to conduct direct action to meet their demands cannot really call themselves negotiators. We have now a system that I call “collective begging,” not collective bargaining.

*Gregory:* We used to talk about a two-tier system and how adjuncts were brought in to protect tenure, but now there's a three-tier, four-tier system...

*Aronowitz:* The tiering starts with the professor and the private universities, the tenured professoriate. Then among them there are distinctions, if not differences. The humanists in the private universities are probably stuck at \$150,000, \$160,000. However, the scientists and the social scientists among them, especially economists and people who are in molecular biology and biotechnology and computers, they're making real money, and I mean *real* money. Some of it is from grants, and some of it is by the fiction called “summer salaries,” where they can get two-ninths of summer salaries, but they're piling that up a little bit. The problem obviously is that you have the research university in the elite schools, and then you have the humanists and the arts as a second tier. The third tier is the public university. It's pretty serious, and then you have a fourth tier, which is the adjunct or the part-timers or the contingent.

*Gregory:* What is the future of tenure?

*Aronowitz:* Tenure, it's done. It's only a matter of time. Before the Second World War, tenure was a privilege reserved for very, very few people. Now, it's become more commonplace. A third to 40 percent of people who start out as assistant professors on tenure track end up getting tenure within the institution, but, of course, the elite institutions, they don't give you tenure. You have to go back to a state university and then come back to the private universities, if you're sufficiently distinguished. I use that word with a small “d” but basically, no, it's gone, and so we're going to have more full-time people or non-tenure-track positions, and we have already a lot of people getting hired without tenure. There are a lot of institutions that don't offer tenure.

And, of course, the problem is this: Historically, people went into the university not necessarily to get tenure. They went into the university because, on the one hand, they wanted to do intellectual work or they wanted to do research, which is not the same thing, by the way. What they got paid in terms of money was, relatively speaking, not much, but what they had was a workload that made it possible for them to do their research. I'll give you an example. In 2012, I wrote a book on C. Wright Mills (*Taking it Big: C. Wright Mills and the Making of Political Intellectuals*, Columbia University Press). Now C. Wright Mills starts out at the University of Maryland. He ends up at Columbia University, teaches undergraduates, but he has a 2:2 workload, and he does a lot of intellectual work. He can take time off because he gets grants. He can get lecture fees, all kinds of stuff, but he always complained that the money he was making wasn't enough. And it was true. Until *The Power Elite* in 1956, when he was forty years old, he said he didn't make a living, but we don't even offer housing today. Most public universities don't offer housing, especially those in the four-year colleges.

*Gregory:* If you were going to recommend a certain set of study for organizing, what would you tell them to look at? What part of labor history would you point them toward?

*Aronowitz:* Start with the history of the professional unions. You know what the first one was? It was the Bookkeepers Union in 1913. Bookkeepers Union, Teachers Union in 1960. Those professional unions functioned without a contract. The teachers' unions did not get a contract until the early 60s. The TU, which was the New York State Teachers Union, communist led, was influential in educational policy in a way that the current union, which is the UFT and the AFT, NYSUT, New York State United Teachers, is not. They have much less influence on educational policy than that small communist-led teachers' union because that small union cared about educational policy. So, the first thing is to study the teachers' unions' history, professional unions in general, and then to study educational policy. What is public education? What is that? What are the changes?

In 1918, for example, Thorstein Veblen writes a book, *The Higher Learning in America*. He says that the higher learning in America was never, never really broadly a liberal arts; it was always predicated especially with the *Morrill Act* of 1862. Under Abraham Lincoln's aegis, for whatever reason, Congress passed a law called the *Morrill Act*, which provided for states to allocate part of their state-owned land for universities. The land-grant universities were born under the *Morrill Act*, and which was the first one? Wisconsin.

*Gregory:* It's heartbreaking what has happened to the University of Wisconsin.

*Aronowitz:* They're going to rewrite the mission of a public university. They're going to turn it into a public service corporation. Private oriented, job oriented, whatever the corporates' needs are, we will provide a curriculum. Yet these are technoscientific and agricultural institutions. The humanist dimension, which came into effect at the turn of the twentieth century with people like John Dewey, was a reflection of the growth of the progressive era, the labor movement, the anticorruption crusades, and the flowering of American literature. It was not a movement that was sponsored by the higher-ups in higher education. They were never that kind of people. There are exceptions, of course, but essentially that progressive era was, in effect, a catalyst, although the university was a smaller institution than it is today. In 1939, there were 1.1 million students in the whole of American higher education, and today there are 15.7 million students. The institutionalization of humanism survived the war and went beyond it. It became a Cold War weapon of the American foreign policy. Humanists and certain social scientists, anthropologists and sociologists and economists, became necessary for social as well as economic policy.

When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991 and the Eastern Europeans went the way of the Soviet Union, the reason for a humanist education disappeared as far as the establishment was concerned, as far as the corporate establishment was concerned. So, what we've seen in the last twenty-five years now is a steady erosion of the universities, transforming them into a technoscientific institution, a corporate-oriented technoscientific institution. What's interesting about it is that before that, in the period from 1945 to roughly 1990, the Cold War supported the humanities for Cold War reasons and because they wanted to buy and integrate the humanists into the establishment. They did that by creating jobs. Now they don't have to buy them anymore.

*Gregory:* In 1998, you said it's really a question of "distance learning" and that such innovations will be a weapon of weakening faculty power and cheapening labor. Do you still see that as the key issue, or is there something more insidious happening now along technological lines?

*Aronowitz:* Well, the first thing I would hold on to is that what I said in 1998 is still the case. Distance learning is a way of flattening the quality of higher education. We can go into that again if you want, but today it's a different story. Today, we're talking about—how shall I put it? I'm going to say it dramatically. The question is whether we have any interest in preserving civilization as we know it, and I use the word colloquially, not to refer to the historical groups called barbarians. The barbarism of this institution now is really incredible. It has no interest at all. Again, there are always exceptions, but the institution has no interest in, even, Western values, forget about values in general. It will create an East Asia institute here and it will create something else there, but basically it's not what they're interested in. They're interested in helping the State Department and the Defense Department develop policy, and they use academics to help them develop policy. These institutes, centers on international or multinational global interests, are really not about knowledge. They're about policy. It's about the implications of this for investment, for the U.S. military, hegemony, and so on, but, as far as the curriculum is concerned, the curriculum is being squeezed all the time if it's not science and math.

*Gregory:* In that way, thinking again about organizing and the labor of teaching, within that larger framework that you're just articulating, how do people, how does such a class come to say, "we produce value here"?

*Aronowitz:* Well, what they have to do in the first place is to understand the structure of the institution. I said the first thing is the labor history of professionals and public employment. Then you have to understand the institution, and the institution within which we live now is not even similar to the institution of the 1980s. It isn't. It's a post-Cold War institution where the humanities and much of the social sciences are not at all valued. So you have to ask the questions: What are our values? What do we think is important? What is it that literary criticism is about? What should sociologies and political sciences study? Are we to be—I mean this for political science—pole organizers for the two political parties and for the state? Is that what we're supposed to do? Well, Arthur Bentley, who invented political science in 1908, thought that that was what they're supposed to do, and they do it. Sociology, which once had a critical edge, has lost it almost completely—not to say that there aren't, again, individuals and people who are in social theory, who are in cultural studies and other places, who resist, but, generally speaking, sociology has got its hand out. They want to be social policy framers for the state.

*Gregory:* Given the current state of affairs that we've been discussing, what does Marx still offer the scholarship of academic labor?

*Aronowitz:* You could say, as Mills said, "Those who are not at all influenced by Marx and have not really spent any time studying Marx are really deeply deprived, and their work is going to be eternally flawed." Because, as Jean-Paul Sartre says, and Mills agreed (not because of Sartre, but because he came to the conclusion independently), Marxism, with all of its flaws, is the philosophy of capitalism. It is an analysis of capitalism updated by many scholars. It's really the only viable analysis of capitalism that we have. So, to begin with, what Marxism and what Marx himself offers is a theory of capitalism, which can be criticized but also must be absorbed or integrated into any new paradigm that we might develop. That's number one.

Number two, Marx had a conception of work that is completely opposed to the dominant conception, the dominant bourgeois conception. He thought most work under capitalism was shit, and he developed this argument in a number of places. He understood that the theory of value and surplus value, that is to say the Smithian and then the Ricardian theory, was really, in many ways, a theory about the reduction of the human being to a function of the industrial machine. Therefore, if we were going to have an alternative to capitalism, we would have to begin to think about how we restore humans to their existence. Now, it is true that some of the best work that's going on now in social theory is demonstrating how the relationship between humans and the machine has become integrated.

So, we have two choices: either we raise our hands and surrender and say, "Okay, this is it, we're going to submit to computerization. We're going to submit to the 'machinic.'" The second possibility is that we understand that even if there is no turning back—and Marx thought there was no turning back—there are limits that have to be addressed as to how far humans should be subordinated. Once you begin to ask that question, then you begin to ask the question, "Is capitalism in the interest of human beings?" Marx asked that question, and even many of his followers don't understand that work has become trivialized and that most work, even work that is considered highly technologically and scientifically sophisticated, is not very, very difficult. It's because it's been rationalized, and Marx is the author of rationalization.

The third thing, and the last thing, is that Marx believed that what we would call governmentality, what we would call social and political institutions, should be the product of the direct control of workers. Essentially, this is the idea that people should participate and control their own lives and not simply walk away and consume cars and mortgages on houses and iPhones and all the rest of it. This is a very Marxist idea and it has been ignored: What *is* workers' control?